WILLIAM MEIKLE

THE HAUNTING OF ESTHER COX

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Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. August 23rd 1878

I ain't a bad girl. I don't care what anyone says. I was brought up in a right and Christian manner.

I done told Bob MacNeal that even before I got into the Surrey with him. Daniel glowered at us from the door as we rode off. He wasn't happy about me walking out with Bob, but he ain't my father. He ain't hardly five years older than me yet he treats me like a child.

Well I was eighteen on my birthday, and that surely ain't no child around these parts. Janet Briggs had a baby just last week, and she's no more than sixteen summers. There was talk at Church that Bob might be the father but he has promised himself to me alone. I am his sweetheart, and he says that he loves me.

He was so sweet. He came to the door and asked for me, real proper like, and he complimented me on my new dress. When he kissed me on the cheek I felt hot all over.

He took his time driving along our street, just as I asked. Everyone was out on their porches enjoying the evening breeze, and we made sure they all saw us as we trotted out of town.

It was one of those fine late summer nights, when the air is just starting to chill and you know that Fall is right around the corner and you'd better enjoy the sun while you still can. Ain't nothing finer than sitting in a Surrey with your beau on a night like that.

Bob drove us out on the Nappan Road. At first we passed some people, mostly folks gathering berries to make jelly for the coming winter. But soon we had the lane to ourselves and he gave the horses their head. We had a fine time bouncing and tumbling along the ruts hardened by a long hot summer.

He stopped when we came to Croziers pond. When he put his hands on my waist to lift me down it felt so sweet that I let him leave his arm around me as we sat and watched the sun go down over the water.

That is when he told me.

He loves me.

He said it real soft, scarcely more than a whisper.

His hand crept to my bosom, and I let it lie there. But I ain't no bad girl.

That evening was just the best ever. The sun went down pink and purple and Bob held me closer as the air turned chill. He whispered to me, of new dresses, of marriage. And he spoke of a house of our own where children would run. He knew just what I wanted.

So I let his hand stray across my bosom, and I did not complain when his attentions became stronger. It was only when his hand moved to my knee that I began to protest. Even then, I did not

struggle too much for if truth be told, I found pleasure in his advances.

But I ain't a bad girl. When his hand went up under my petticoat I slapped him away, hard. I done seen in his eyes that he weren't happy, but Jane had told me all about what boys would be after.

He held me some more, and whispered some more, but now it sounded cold, and the chill had settled deeper into my bones.

I told him to take me home.

And that's when it happened.

He done told me I was a *tease.* He said I was a bad girl underneath, and that he knew all about girls like me.

Then he took out his gun and told me to lie still.

He said I would enjoy it, but I didn't. Not one bit.

He ran his hands all over me underneath my skirts. His face looked red in the last of the sun's light. He looked like Old Nick himself, smiling in the fires of Hell.

So I waited until he unbuckled his trousers then did what Jane had taught me. I kicked him hard, between the legs. He moaned and fell off me. His gun fell to the ground. He made a grab for it, but he was more concerned with the thing between his legs and was slow and clumsy. He no longer looked red. His face was pale, a gray pallor that made him look half-dead. He did not look anywhere near as attractive as he had earlier on the porch.

I took the gun and raked it across his nose. Blood, black in the darkness, spurted.

Even then he did not stay down. He circled me, like a cat after a mouse. Indeed, he may have caught me, but just them I heard a carriage rattle across the ruts and I yelled, loud.

I turned my head to see who might be coming.

The gun went off, jarring my arm all the way up to my shoulder. It suddenly felt too heavy, so I dropped it to the ground. I half-expected Bob to keep coming for me, but when I looked he was dragging himself slowly up into the Surrey. He moved as if he was hurt. I guess my kick did more damage than I thought.

The next thing I remember is old man Crozier pulling me up into his wagon.

Ain't nobody seen Bob for three days now.

Despite everything I miss him.

I am his sweetheart, and he said that he loves me.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. August 23rd 1878

There is something wrong with my sister-in-law Esther. She will

not say a bad word about him, but if that rascal MacNeal has harmed her in any way I swear I will swing for him.

I did not want her walking out with him in the first place, but she is as headstrong as her sister is, and I have learned long since not to get between a Cox woman and anything that she desires.

MacNeal always was going to turn out to be a bad ‘un. Ever since he was a boy he has been picking fights, lighting fires and more recently whooping it up down at the saloon on a Saturday night. Then there is the matter of the Briggs girl. She swears blind that MacNeal is the father of her child, and no amount of nay-saying on his behalf will persuade me otherwise.

Good riddance to him. Old man Crozier said he saw him hightailing off in the Surrey like a rat with a squib up its arse.

He had better not come back.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. September 3rd 1878

There is still no news of Bob MacNeal. I do hope he comes back. I am so sorry I hurt him. But I ain’t a bad girl. I couldn’t do what he wanted.

I missed the dance in the Church Hall on Saturday. Jane wanted me to go with her, but I waited at home to see if Bob would call on me.

The house was quiet. The parlor was too cold, too dark, so I took my book and a candle upstairs to my room. When the wind dropped I could hear the fiddles from the hall and it fair set my feet to tapping. The new dress hung behind the bedroom door, and I knew it would only take me ten minutes to dress and take myself along to the dance.

But then I might miss Bob calling at the door, and I so wanted to see him again.

So I sat still and quiet, listening for his Surrey on the road outside.

The first time I heard the mouse, if that is indeed what it was, I nearly jumped out of my skin. At first it was little more than a rustle behind the headboard. We are used to mice coming in from the fields when the temperature starts to drop. A good thump on the wall usually sends them scurrying for safety…but not this one.

The tap-tap of its feet sounded in time with the music of the dance for a second. From where I sat on the high bed I could not see it, but I heard it run along the side of the wall towards the window. I got up, slowly and carried the candle over. Even as I got closer it scurried away again, and even bending down towards the floorboards I could not quite catch sight of it as it merged with the shadows.

I went back to my book but I could not concentrate. Every time I came close to losing myself in the tale, the *pitter-patter* of tiny feet would start again. I gave up trying to read and lost myself in reverie, imagining Bob and I together on the dance floor, him holding me tight and everyone watching us.

A louder scrape brought me back to myself. The cardboard box in which my dress had arrived moved across the floor and came to a halt near the door. As I got off the bed it moved again, sliding noisily back to where it had originally been standing against the wall. I watched it warily but the movement was not repeated.

I lay back and watched the moon cast shadows on the ceiling in time with the dance music wafting on the wind.

Sleep was a long time coming, and when I woke I did not feel at all rested.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. September 3rd 1878

I know not what to make of it.

We were late in getting back from the Church Hall and the house was in darkness. I was slightly merry, having taken too much beer during the course of the evening, and I felt hot and tired.

All I wanted to do was fall into bed and rest.

But it was not to be.

Jane noticed the sound first, a far-off scratching, like fingernails on wood. I would have put it down to mice or maybe squirrels, but the sobbing started almost as soon as I put a foot on the stairs to the upper floor.

We found Esther lying on top of the bedclothes. She was as naked as the day she was born. Jane shooed me away, but not before I saw that her body seemed gross and bloated, like a neglected cow that has not been milked for many days. Her eyes stared at the ceiling but she did not react to our presence. She just kept sobbing in a soft piteous mewling that brought tears to all that heard it.

Jane pushed me out into the hall where my brother John stood, unsure what was to be done. We had started on our way downstairs when the whole house shook with a bang that made me think we were under attack from cannon fire. John and I ran for our guns and headed outside to meet what might be there.

There was only the clear quiet night sky.

We stood there for long minutes but there was no repeat of the noise. After a while we retired inside for some liquid courage.

Jane came down later to tell us that Esther now seemed settled and slept soundly.

In the morning Esther showed no sign of remembering any of it, and we have not spoken of it since.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. September 10th 1878

I scarce know where to begin.

My sleep has been troubled of late, and it came to a head just this last night. I tossed and turned for hours, alternatively hugging the bedclothes close to me, then throwing them asunder when they became too confining.

I had just pulled them tight around me when I heard the scampering of tiny feet once more. I intended to chase that mouse from my chamber. I threw the bedclothes off… and they kept going, sailing across the room as if propelled by a high wind. They hung, suspended in the air, a full foot above the floor.

Their crumpled shape looked like a body doubled over in pain.

I have no memory of it, but I believe I must have screamed, for I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and cries of concerned alarm. For my part I couldn't take my gaze from the bundle of bedclothes. It *drifted*, as if being at the whim of wind and tide. Then, just as Jane appeared in the doorway, the bundle fell to the floor with a muffled thud.

Jane and Daniel were most officious, and insisted on treating me like an invalid. Daniel made me drink a sleeping draught. It tasted vile, but within several minutes I had all but forgotten the drifting bedclothes as my mind wandered in a hazy stupor that was not unpleasant.

I have only the vaguest memory of the rest of the night, and only have Daniel's word as to what actually happened. What cannot be denied is the presence of the writing, and the whispering that I hear even now as I write this entry.

You may not believe any good of me. But if you believe nothing else, believe this.

I ain't a bad girl.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. September 10th 1878

Esther has not been well, and things reached a climax yesterday evening.

When we arrived in the bedchamber Esther was in a state of distress, and it required a strong dose of Doctor Walton's opiates to calm her. We were about to retire, confident that the girl was now

asleep, when her bedclothes blew from the bed. Esther had not moved, yet the quilt was thrown the full length of the room. When I went to retrieve it I found it to be like wrestling with a recalcitrant sheep. The material seemed to twist in my arms, fighting against me at every turn.

Brother John came to my aide. The quilt went still and we were able to drape it over Esther. But the girl was once more swollen up like a dead fish too long in the water, and her skin took on a deep red hue, as if burning from within. I dispatched John to fetch the doctor while Jane and I took turns sitting with Esther. She showed no sign of being aware of our presence, merely stared, wide-eyed and unseeing, at the ceiling.

When the doctor finally arrived, my brother John would not come back into the bedroom. Indeed, he has packed his bags and departed without saying goodbye. And I cannot say as I blame him.

The doctor had barely bent over Esther when the bedclothes swirled up as if caught by a maelstrom and wrapped themselves around the man's head, threatening to suffocate him there and then. It was only through Jane and I combining out strength that we were able to rip them from him. I thought that might be the end of his visit and that he would leave as John had left. But the doctor proved to be made of sterner stuff.

He bent forward once more and took Esther's wrist, feeling for a pulse.

At that same instant the room rang as *something* banged hard, like a child slapping his hands against the wall. The noise ran in a circle, the full turn of the room.

Then silence fell.

Esther began to thrash and moan. The banging returned, louder this time, the whole building rocking and echoing as crashes like thunder filled the room. Plaster fell from the walls and every part of my being wanted to flee, to follow my brother to the nearest inn where we could start to forget together. Only Jane's hand in mine stayed my flight.

The doctor administered laudanum and held Esther down. Slowly the drumming started to subside. Even as Esther calmed we all heard the scratching. We could not identify where it was coming from. The noise seemed to fill the air, from everywhere and nowhere.

It was Jane who saw it first. The writing appeared, scripted by an invisible hand, in crude four-inch high letters above the headboard of the bed. Just reading it made my blood run cold.

"You are mine to kill."

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. October 4th 1878

The doctor said the voices would stop. Why have the voices not stopped?

Every night he drums on the walls, and every night he whispers to me, so close that I alone can hear him.

He says that he loves me.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. November 6th 1878

It is a week now since we sent Esther to the sanatorium, a week of blessed relief from that infernal drumming and the incessant scratching. The house has returned to a semblance of normality.

Esther is on the mend. The doctor says it was diptheria, and that it will take several more weeks of rest and recuperation before she is able to return home. I am unable to reconcile the diagnosis with all that has occurred in this house, but to admit to anything other would only lead to madness.

In her delirium Esther spoke often of Bob MacNeal, and in a lucid moment told Jane that the man had tried to take advantage of her maidenhood. At that very same moment the drumming in the room reached a crescendo of noise that deafened the whole household.

I cannot help but think that all we have suffered has been a result of that night back in August. If MacNeal ever shows his face around these parts again, I shall surely kill him.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. December 14th 1878

I have only been home these past two days, yet I fear that once more I will bring terror and fear to my family.

I was so happy to be home and in my own bed again after the weeks of quiet desperation in the sanatorium. I had started to believe that the whispering had all been a delusion on my part, a reaction to the fever that had raged through me.

But the very first night home showed me that I ain't free. I might never be free again.

I was lying in my own bed, just luxuriating in the soft quilts, when I smelled smoke. Somebody laughed, a deep chuckle that sounded cold and hard. Suddenly there was heat at my feet. I had to throw the quilt to the ground and stomp on it to stop it smoldering, and if Jane ever finds out about the blackened hole there then I will be in serious trouble.

Afterwards, I found a spent match on the floor, and when I picked it up, the chuckle came again, closer this time, as if someone stood at my ear.

The first night home that was the only occurrence, but last night it happened twice – I was sitting reading quietly when once more the quilt started to burn. And even as I stomped to extinguish it, the drawer of the dresser opened and smoke came from the petticoats I have stored there.

This time I found two spent matches. As I threw the blackened stumps from the window the chuckling returned, louder this time, and with a distinct air of malice.

My heart raced, and I was unable to get any rest after that. As I lay there in the darkness the sound I had not heard in months came back – sibilant whisperings in my ear, of love and honor, of fidelity… and of death.

I am greatly afeared, but I dare not tell.

If I tell, they will surely send me away again. That is what happens to bad girls. And next time I may not be allowed to return.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. December 26th 1878

We cannot take any more. Yuletide is meant to be a time of rejoicing and celebration. This year, our gifts were only fire and terror.

It all started so innocuously. The alarms of the autumn had been forgotten, and, while Esther was still pale and confined herself mostly to her room, there had been no incident of real note since her return these two weeks past.

I set the Yule Log to burn on the fire and nailed the holly wreaths in the porch. There had been a light snowfall overnight, and I called the family to see the scene before any thaw could tarnish it. It was an idyllic moment… but that was as good as the day ever got.

We were all on the porch when Esther started to scream – so loud that I saw lace curtains twitch and doors open all along the street as our neighbors took notice. As luck would have it I was closest to the door, and first up the stairs.

Esther sat on a bed of quilting that was already well alight, screaming as dancing flames reached for her. Jane arrived at my heels and between us we managed to drag her off the bed and away from the fire.

The flame had already taken hold in the walls, and we had to take to ferrying buckets up the stairwell. Townsfolk arrived to throw water on the exterior to prevent the fire spreading and even then we

only just managed to control the raging conflagration.

Afterwards, as we all stood outside staring at the charred side of the building, I was aware that our neighbors were being vocal in their disapproval of Esther's continued presence in the street. There was even talk of sending for a priest.

I myself had to stand between Esther and three women intent on *beating the devil out of the girl.*

Matters came round to shouting and pushing, and may have turned to something even worse had John White not intervened. He has always had a soft spot for Esther, even when she was but a child, and he has offered to take her into rooms in his inn on the other side of town, until things calm down.

Esther seems amenable to this offer, and she has gone with the innkeeper.

I spent much of my Christmas clearing up water damage and salvaging what I can from the ruin of her room.

I am far from feeling any festive cheer.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. February 14th 1879

I had thought John White to be a friend. Indeed, I do believe his intentions to be sincere. But this table rapping smacks of the devil's business, and I ain't sure that any good will come of it.

His friends are nice people, and they mean well, but they seemed far too excited when my whispering friend decided to share his affections with them around their table. There is talk of inviting a man from the newspapers, and Mr. White whispered of visitors from as far as New York.

And I have discovered something I did not know. My whispering man has a name. Rab Nickle he calls himself, and right proud of it he seems too.

The others have not yet seen his cruelty. He pricks me with needles that can not be seen, scratches me with invisible nails. The pain is excruciating. He says I deserve it. He says that one day I will burn with him in hell.

The others think that I jest when I talk like this. They do not know him as I do… they do not fear him, and the foul beings that he sometimes brings with him.

But they will come to realize the error of their ways.

I can only hope it will not be too late.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. June 8th 1879

She is home.

Jane at least is most glad to see her sister after such an absence. And Esther herself is full of stories of *away*. Her sojourn with John White has led to a change in her, and I am not yet sure it is for the better. She says that there have been no *incidents* for some months.

Indeed, she has traveled farther than any of us have, to Moncton and Halifax, St John and Fredrickstown. She seems to have been spent most of her time sitting at tables and interpreting the raps that have ensued. She now says that the events of last year were due to people *from the other side* trying to communicate with her. She clearly believes herself to be communing with these spirits, and indeed John White shares these fantasies.

Esther does not seem quite herself. There is a distant quality to here that was not previously apparent, and she is pale and drawn. She wears high necked and long sleeved dresses, and will not even suffer Jane to see what is beneath, but at lunch one arm of her dress rode up and showed a mess of purple bruising and raised welts.

John White says that everything has been *normal*. However there was a look in his eye that told a lie to that statement. I pressed him for information, and he regaled me with tales of *experiments* and even showed me some newspaper cuttings that declared Esther to be a marvel.

John White has asked my permission to invite a certain Mr. Walter Hubbell to talk to Esther. Mr. Hubbell is deemed an *expert* on these matters… if there is indeed any such thing. But John seems to believe that the man may be able to help, and I have given my tentative agreement.

Over supper I started to wonder whether I had made the right decision. Esther barely touched her food. She seemed over-eager to get back to *her* room. We have had it redecorated for her return, and it looks just as she left it.

And that is what worries me.

Just before she retired for the night she was asking after Bob MacNeal, and whether there was any news of him. It is almost as if she still expects the man to call on her again… almost as if that is what she has been waiting for all these months.

Mr. Hubbell will be here in two weeks.

Let us hope he arrives before any more trouble comes our way.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. June 9th 1879

I knew as soon as I walked in the door that he was waiting for

me.

He says that if I will be his bad girl, he will love me forever and never hurt me again.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. August 18th 1879

Walter Hubbell arrived today. He may soon wish he had not bothered to make the journey.

It began as soon as he entered the house. He had barely shaken my hand when the whole upstairs of the dwelling started to reverberate with the all too familiar pounding. He followed me upstairs showing no little trepidation.

Esther was in the throes of one of her attacks. Her flesh had bloated and swelled, orange as a pumpkin and almost fit to burst. Hubbell held his umbrella ahead of him as if it were a sword he might use to protect himself.

It proved useless. An unseen force tore the umbrella from his hand and dashed it, over and over, against the dresser until it was no more than a tangle of cloth and stays. And the presence did not finish there. Hubbell's tweed trousers started to smoke – first at the ankles, then at the thighs until he was forced to divest himself of them completely. If it had not been for the raw burns raised on his skin I might have almost found it comical.

A lesser man might have taken to his heels and fled, but it seems that our Mr. Hubbell is made of stern stuff. After redressing himself he once more ventured into the room. He spoke calmly to Esther, as if addressing a distraught child, and, eventually, she did indeed calm herself.

I watched from the doorway as he whispered to her. I was too far away to hear what was being said, but from the intonation in his voice I soon realized he was asking a series of questions.

After a time *something* began to answer, manifesting itself as a series of raps on the wall… one rap for *No*, two for *Yes*.

Hubbell kept up the questioning.

Esther seemed to be sleeping soundly, but still the rapping answers echoed around the room.

Finally, after what seemed an age, Hubbell seemed satisfied. He rose and led me back down to the kitchen where I poured us both a large measure of whisky.

The man was quiet for a long time before he spoke, and when he did it was in a hushed whisper. He told me that his *expertise* actually comes from the fact that he is a stage magician. He has arrived to debunk Esther's story, expecting to find fraud.

Now he believes he has found something else.

He believes she tells the truth, and that the spirits really do possess my sister-in-law.

I know not whether to be happy or appalled.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. September 12th 1879

Mr. Hubbell has been here for nearly a month now, and I scarcely remember a minute of it.

He says that we are making good progress, and that the *personalities* are providing him with a wealth of material. He intends to write a book, and says it will make our fortune.

I do not have the heart to tell him that Rab Nickle is a cheat and a liar. Mr. Hubbell is only being told what he wants to hear, and the poor man is so besotted with the notion of writing the book that he is rushing ahead regardless.

In the meantime, Rab has kept whispering to me. He really is *most* insistent. He says he will not go until I do just what he says. He tortures me nightly, with burns and pinpricks. Jane has taken to leaving pails of water around the room, and last night she caught the flames just as the drapes on the window took alight otherwise we might all have perished.

Rab was not amused, and pricked me mightily in the thighs. He has demanded a burning, a conflagration that will sweep away all doubt. I am sorely afeared that I will give in to his insistence.

But I must remain strong. Mr. Hubbell has arranged a *soiree* for next week. He has invited dignitaries from all over and says that I will be a sensation. Rab is already whispering of it. He says that unless I do as he says, he will be very naughty indeed.

But I ain't no bad girl. I cannot do it. I *will* not do it.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. September 20th 1879

Mr. Hubbell's stay had rather an abrupt end. He has only his own *hubris* to blame for the debacle.

The church hall was full last night and people had come from far and wide. There was even a newspaperman from Boston, sitting there in clothes better suited for a Yankee summer than a Maritime Fall. Many of our neighbors packed the rear of the room, eager to finally get a look at the object of all their gossip.

Esther did not disappoint.

It started quietly, with more table rapping taking place in almost

total darkness. The large crowd started to get restless, and indeed Tom Allardyce had to be escorted from the hall for making lewd suggestions as to what might be going on *under* the table. Mr. Hubbell remained unruffled, and at this point Esther was calm, even if her blank stare and rapid breathing was proving most disconcerting.

The in-comers at the front were rapt and stiff with attention throughout. Even more so when Hubbell had the lights lit and proceeded to demonstrate Esther's remarkable affinity with needles. I had seen her attract metal objects several times over the past months, purely by stretching her hand out for them, but Hubbell had taken this aptitude further, using his obvious stagecraft to send needles dancing in the air above the tables. He continued to amuse and entertain, even while poor Esther sat there, red as hot coals and sweating profusely. I had a mind to put a stop to the nonsense then and there, and indeed, some of the audience agreed with me. Several people left, shaking their heads, and yet others started to heckle loudly.

Alice Brown brought the evening to its abrupt end by wondering out loud what Bob MacNeal had ever seen in someone as ugly as Esther was. She immediately regretted it when a needle that had just been hovering above the table flew across the hall and embedded itself in her cheek.

Things quickly went to hell in a hand basket. Hubbell had to step back sharply as the table overturned. The hall went cold, so quickly that I saw my breath condense in front of me.

The curtains on either side of the stage started to smoke and smolder, and Esther herself convulsed, her body racked with involuntary tremors.

I leapt on stage and threw her over my shoulder, intent on carrying her away as quickly as I was able.

Stagehands were already working hard to douse a fire that had leapt up all around the hall and as I left Hubbell had to be soaked to avoid his expensive looking suit bursting into flame.

Esther did not wake until we got her home and into bed. Even then, she showed no memory of the night's activities.

Mr. Hubbell arrived some time later and sheepishly vacated his room. He is still convinced that he will write his book, but he does not intend to return to Amherst.

I am sure that is for the best, for all of us.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. September 21st 1879

Rab was happy with his *performance* in the Church Hall, and even happier to have seen off Mr. Hubbell.

He says that now he has me to himself, things will be much better.

As for myself, I discovered something very interesting during Mr. Hubbell's time here. Yes, Rab is inside me. But when he is making his mischief, he is *outside* me.

Rab is a bad man.

And I ain't a bad girl.

But if I want to get rid of him, that might have to change.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. October 10th 1879

Wonders will never cease.

Esther has taken employment, working for Arthur Davison out at the Barrens, looking after his livestock. And she seems to have settled into a routine.

I do believe that with Hubbell leaving, the worst of it may have gone with him.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. October 28th 1879

I am free and I have Mr. Davison's barn to thank for it.

It happened last night.

I had come prepared. The matchbox felt hot in my pocket, and I was worried that at any moment Rab would guess my intent and punish me further.

But he had other things on his mind.

I was in the barn fetching some straw for the horses when Rab chose to misbehave. I only noticed when the wall opposite me quivered, the straw shaping and molding itself, running together and binding, small knots forming as I watched. A bulge appeared in the straw, a bulge that forced itself into shape, first a head covered in flaxen hair then shoulders, tanned and golden. Rab's face leered at me.

"Be nice to me and I will love you forever", he whispered.

My hand shook violently as I tried to open the matchbox and I nearly dropped the contents when the straw *thing* that Rab inhabited reached for me. I felt a hand on my knee, attempting to reach under my petticoat.

I struck match after match and dropped them in the straw. Slowly but sure they started to take.

I knocked the straw hand away from my leg and dropped a freshly lit match on the forearm. It went up with a *whoosh.* The flames

spread fast, and I had to step away to avoid being burned.

Rab laughed loudly, even as the barn took hold and the straw in which his features were etched started to break apart sending sparks to dance in the wind.

"That's my bad girl," he whispered. "You do not need me any more."

And as simply as that, he was gone.

I retreated outside and watched the fire burn. Rab's face leered at me one last time form the raging flames before the roof collapsed and the barn fell in on itself sending sparks, and all that remained of Rab Nickle, flying and dispersing in the wind.

Afterwards they put me in a cell, and say that I will be here for a while.

I do not care. I have been listening hard, and there have been no more whispers.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Daniel Teed. December 10th 1879

I cannot tell Esther. I am worried what might happen if I do. She has only just been released to our custody and although she *seems* fine, we are all still tiptoeing around her, and no one will talk of what has occurred.

They found a body out in Croziers Pond yesterday. The critters have been at it, and it cannot with any certainty be said who it might be. But it has a bullet hole in its back, and old Doc Walton says that it has been in the water for more than a year.

~-o0O0o-~

Extract from the diary of Esther Cox. December 10th 1879

I am a bad girl.

And I am free.

~-o0O0o-~

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